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AUTHOR Putzel, Roger
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ABSTRACT

The use of a foreign language as part of the managerial context rather than as a technical tool was examined. Eighteen people in nine companies, primarily from the manufacturing sector, were interviewed to raise a set of issues pertaining to the use of a foreign employer's language (FEL). All of the companies in the sample were within a day's drive of Burlington, Vermont, a region with a culture of its own where more than a third of the inhabitants claim French-Canadian ancestry. Three FELs were chosen: French, German, and Japanese. The interviews were conducted using a list of questions as a point of departure rather than as a protocol. It was found that American managers in the greater Vermont area make very little use of their FEL, and English is often specified by policy as the operating language for the company. English is also the language of most high-tech work. Findings are reported in the following areas: rules about the use of FEL; differences in the use of the FEL; feelings about the use of the FEL; difficulty of using the FEL; desire to use the FEL; the difficulty of relating desire to policy; language training; company policy; special issues like relations with the head office and the changing organizational culture. It is noted that language classes don't work, especially if they take up blocks of work time, and that to be effective, language learning must be integrated into the change of organizational culture. (LB)

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by
Roger Putzel, PhD

Assistant Professor
of
Business Administration
St. Michael's College
Colchester, Vermont
U.S.A.

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Globalization of business and foreign investment in the United States would seem to internationalize the American workplace. More and more Americans work in foreign-owned companies. Newspapers and magazines cite examples of Americans getting ahead in their companies by speaking the foreign language. Americans need to learn foreign languages, we are told.

Learning a foreign language takes time; language programs cost money. Time and money - in that order - are scarce resources. So businesspeople who run organizations in this global business environment and researchers who study it would do well to investigate this need to learn foreign languages and the methods currently being used to meet it.

One learns a language in order to use it. Such use can take many forms. The utility of serving a client or negotiating with a customer in that person's language seems evident but might bear study. This exploratory study focuses on communication within international organizations; it asks if, how, why, and how much American employees use the language of their foreign (non-English speaking) employers. 'Foreign Employer's Language' will henceforth be abbreviated FEL.

The use of the FEL also has interest as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. To summarize sociolinguistic principles set forth by Ferguson (1959)[1] and Fishman (1972),[2] **language measures power.** When two languages are spoken within one social system (diglossia), one of them is associated with the higher, more powerful class of people and one, with the lower, less powerful. In the United States immigrants have come in at the bottom of the social scale. Perhaps Americans in general associate foreign languages with low social class.

Business organizations are social systems with explicit power differences; legitimate power defines the boss's position and the responsibilities of people down the line. In a country where English predominates, companies owned by non-English-speaking foreigners present an anomaly: the boss's language is not English.

Anyone experienced in organizational life and any Organizational Behavior textbook will tell you that ambitious employees adopt the behavior patterns of top management. Does this principle extend to the use of the FEL? Are American managers aligning their behavior with the power structures of their companies by using the language of their foreign employers?

This research tests language behavior, the simple use or non-use of a language, as a possible indicator of important organizational phenomena. Concerning international careers, for instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that someone can be

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accepted among foreign managers by using the FEL.[3] Are American managers becoming oriented towards international careers within their foreign-owned companies?

Language behavior could be linked to issues which excite or preoccupy managers. Management means getting things done through people. It is not just making money and is definitely not a straightforward technique. What issues excite or preoccupy managers in a particular, foreign-owned company as they try to work through other people above and below them? The answer to such an empirical question applies only to that company, but does the concern have a language dimension? Could a change in the language behavior of certain people contribute to a goal which a particular manager wants to reach?

One may anticipate or at least check for certain preoccupations of top managers of foreign-owned companies. No CEO could neglect relations with the head office. In what language are they conducted? Does the use of English affect such communication? Issues of national culture affect the relations between the parent and the American company. Does familiarity with or use of the FEL sensitize Americans to the parent's culture? A related concept, organizational culture,[4] pre-occupies many American managers, especially those trying to implement the efficient but psychologically evanescent concept of self-managing work groups. How do such concepts translate? Does it matter whose language is used to communicate them? Is there a connection between some of these issues and the use of the FEL?

In short, what if we look at the use of a foreign language as part of its managerial context rather than as a technical tool?

Design of the Study

The exploratory nature of this inquiry called for an interview design, rather than questionnaires. Time and budget constraints limited the number of companies and the geographical area to be covered. So far interviews have taken place with nine companies, three of them by telephone. A coincidence of personal vacation plans also made possible one interview of the president and vice-president of one parent company at its head office in France. In all 18 people were interviewed; one busy informant responded in writing to the list of questions.

With one exception companies were chosen from the manufacturing sector of the economy, because manufacturing usually requires a great deal of communication with the parent firm below the executive level. An interview took place in one company in the energy business to add a second, French-speaking North American company to the sample.

Companies have unique cultures and situations; so one must generalize with caution. To build up the sample for one language or country, only three FELs were chosen: French, German, and Japanese. By interviewing companies where French is the FEL, we can perhaps distinguish between language effects and culture effects; francophone Québec **may** have a north American business culture but operates in French. German was chosen because of the similarity of the language to English and the relative abundance of German-owned companies in the greater Vermont area. The businesspeople of the hour, the Japanese have a distinct and much-publicized management style and speak a language very different from ours, which presents the occasion to learn how managers in these firms overcome the relatively high communication barrier.

The interviews were conducted using a list of questions as a point of departure rather than as a protocol. In addition to the interviewer's basic lack of discipline, there were two reasons for this open-ended style. One of the first questions asked was: do you use the language of your foreign employer? Since the answer was usually a categorical "no," the interview had to quickly find fertile ground or end. The second reason: Flexibility was required for the interviewer to identify issues which energize or excite the manager and then to seek a link to the use of the FEL. One does not broach the sensitive topic of relations with the head office by reading a question from a clipboard.

This exploratory research seeks to raise, not to resolve, a set of issues pertaining to the use of a foreign employer's language. All of the companies in this sample lie within a half day's drive of Burlington, Vermont, a region with a culture of its own, where more than a third of the inhabitants claim French-Canadian ancestry, a region where work and the quality of life have their own equilibrium. Vermont colors our findings. The researcher does believe that conclusions of this research regarding the efficacy of language classes apply to many, American companies, but this belief rests on two non-statistical bases: the fact that no significant use of the FEL was found in any company and the personal experience of the researcher and others who have run language programs in companies. This exploratory research makes no statistical or methodological claim that the findings apply with any certainty beyond this sample.

Results: Answers to hypotheses

American managers in the greater Vermont area make very little use of their FEL. The little use of the FEL which occurs, does so in the following settings:

- An American answers the telephone and, by rote, tells a caller from Japan, "I'm sorry. He's not here. Can I get you someone else?"

- The German-born president of a German company speaks his native language over the phone or with visitors.

- Temporary assignments of or business trips by managers or engineers to the head office.

- Two companies with a great deal of interaction with the head office reported local vocabulary developing, sometimes jokingly recognized as a local dialect, where terms and even paralanguage are borrowed from the FEL, a phenomenon similar to pidginization.[5]

- A Francophone Québec-owned manufacturing company declared the receptionist position bilingual as a BFOQ (bona fide occupational qualification). The receptionist answers the phone saying both "Hello" and "Bonjour" and, of course, responds in the language of the caller.

- Money talks; indeed, only money speaks both languages: American and Japanese managers work together in English during meetings, but Americans, as well as Japanese, repeat all numbers in both languages, just to make sure that no mistake affects the bottom line.

Rules about use of FEL

Company policy for employees, where it exists, goes out of its way to specify English as the operating language for the company. Foreign employers are very careful about the sensitivities of employees about language. "We don't want to give the impression that there is an insider's club." American employees are often invited but rarely, in this sample, required to learn the FEL. For researchers this finding is important because it means that the use of the FEL provides a solid behavioral indicator of informal or emergent, as opposed to formal or required behavior and hence gives strong clues about the company culture.

Where any rules exist at all, they favor use of English for global or technical business reasons. In a German-owned, hi-tech company Germans working in the US speak and write English with Germans in Germany in order to help the latter improve their English. Some foreign, global companies require correspondence in English even between parent country nationals, just in case a third party needs the information.[6]

English is the language of most hi-tech work. Many technical terms simply do not exist in other languages. The

informant notes, "A German customer would not understand a German translation [of technical terms]." The informant also noted that Japanese companies, becoming predominant in certain hi-tech sectors, are innovating, using, of course, Japanese terminology. Here the relative inaccessibility of their language creates a linguistic hurdle for non-Japanese competitors.

What rules there are apparently exist to help the company adapt to its environment.

Differences in the use of the FEL

Differences in continental culture and language produced no discernible differences in the use of FEL. More important variables are the importance of the American affiliate within the global or technical business of the parent, the number of native speakers of the FEL working in the affiliate, and perhaps the technology being used.

Feelings about the use of the FEL

As part of the foreign culture, it adds interest to the workplace. "[Japanese managers'] asking you where the bathroom is is such an incredible task, but it's kind of fun."

Several interviewees cited saying a few words of the FEL to visitors from the head office as a friendly gesture.

The Japanese, whose English is not fluent, confer with each other during a meeting in their own language. In several companies, not only Japanese-owned, Americans react with paranoia to such use of the FEL by foreign managers: "They're talking about us!" This distrust has meaning beyond commonplace ethnocentricity, for it denotes distrust of management. The degree of trust that exists between managers and employees is arguably the most important dimension of organizational culture.

Difficulty of using FEL

"I only speak enough German to get in trouble with..."

"Once they realize you understand, your difficulty in coping with it increases exponentially."

One American who does speak German and has lived and worked in Germany expresses the "Second Language Burden": [Speaking the FEL] "you're working very hard, while everyone else is relaxing more and more."

Desire to use FEL

Savoir faire in a social situation was often cited as a reason for learning the language. "You can't divorce the language from culture and from experiences with foreign business people... Social encounters with foreign business colleagues take on a lot more significance and importance than they would have in the U.S. It's like bartering in some cultures; until you've bartered, you can't become friends. In the U.S. we have power breakfasts and that sort of thing, but this is different."

"It pleases them that you want to learn their language." Making a friendly gesture of course takes on a different meaning when pleasing "them" means pleasing the boss.

Knowing the FEL can influence the visibility of individuals who occasionally work at the head office: "People who don't feel comfortable [abroad] resist travel." And it may even affect their influence: "The company honestly told me that knowing the language was not necessary. But they were wrong,and I learned that." Managers cannot afford to react; they must initiate. "[If you don't speak their language] you are only told what you need to know, which doesn't allow you to take the bull by the horns."

There is also risk in not cementing social relations with the dominant coalition in an organization: "One individual, an able manager, had he spoken [the FEL], might still be with the company. [Instead, with slack demand for the company's product] he was permanently laid off."

Difficulty of relating desire to policy

A French top manager's theory: language is part of the progression of global management. Companies exchange first products, then ideas, and finally people. The affiliate and its parent company are apparently engaged in a kind of tug-of-war over a particularly gifted, American engineer. Both companies want his products; he speaks little French and so can't fully communicate his ideas. Although paid mostly by the parent company, he works mostly in the US; so where he fits is not clear.

The other, small companies in the greater Vermont region which made up this sample seem to corroborate this manager's theory. These companies exist to exchange products, are struggling to exchange ideas, and exchange people temporarily, towards the US, or with great difficulty. At least no American manager seems to be thinking of a promotion to the head office of the parent company outside the United States, even to Québec. "It's better to be here in Vermont than two levels higher in Munich."

Language Training

Language training occurs in most of the companies but is ineffective. With one exception, particularly for managers and engineers, people are mentioned as first going to language class then as dropping it because it takes too much time away from work. "On two occasions we had instructors. The interest is very high. The problem is time. When you're putting in 11 to 12 hours of work, it's hard to put in an extra hour for Japanese."

The single exception is an American who is tutored three hours a week. This company president works closely with four (out of six) Francophone middle managers in the American affiliate which finishes a Québec-made product.

Policy anomaly

Language programs are voluntary because fluency is almost impossible to reach through language study on the job and because company policy is usually oriented away from the FEL.

A language program would not be designed as a regular training program. Most training changes job-related behavior. Astute companies also make an effort to see that the new behavior is actually performed at work [8]. Top managers in this sample would agree with the interviewee who said, "We didn't see that a language program would enhance job performance."

This same company president designs the content of a hypothetically effective language program:

"Stage 1: Language development focused on achieving social grace and sensitivity with modest command of the language.

Stage 2: Greater command of the language.

Stage 3: Fluency through immersion."

Issues emerging in the interviews

Relations with the head office may be a source of concern for an affiliate's top management. American affiliates whose function is to manufacture or distribute the parent company's product have the least concern and the least incentive to achieve a meeting of the minds. Even a small American company which simply distributes the parent's product, however, can desire enhanced cultural and linguistic understanding in order to face strategic planning with the best possible "... chemistry between senior management and the board."

In the large majority of companies senior management and the board have very close relations and respect each other a great deal. Yet even in these companies, when the American affiliate plays or wants to play a key role in the global business (not just serving the American market), cultural differences definitely arise.

Americans complain that Europeans tend to think that they know what is right for the customer. The language barrier makes it difficult to work out these differences: an American engineer tells his German counterpart that the customer requests a certain change in the product and asks the counterpart in writing to make it "when you can get around to it." The German counterpart throws the request into the trash, attaching less importance to the customer's request and not even recognizing the wry reference to what the American assumes is an imperative ("The customer wants ...").

Managers are preoccupied with **changing the organizational culture** so that employees, usually working in groups, will take initiative and responsibility. Self-management (also called TQM, the "New Paradigm," and other names) is seen as a way of reducing administrative overhead and of focusing the efforts of managers on the increasingly turbulent environment.

This movement within industry requires employees to become more autonomous and less dependent upon the hierarchy of authority within the organization. So it did not surprise the researcher when the president of an American affiliate spoke of the difficulty Americans had waiting for their German counterparts to get permission to take certain actions. The surprise came when the French firm lodged a similar complaint against its American affiliate!

This decentralization of authority, a profound change of organizational culture, is difficult for any company to implement. The president of the French parent company noted that it takes their employees in France two years to adjust to not being told what to do, two years before the company begins to profit from their labor.

Organizational culture change becomes complicated by differences in national culture and by nuances of the language through which management tries to handle both cultural differences.

One way of bringing about this culture change is to give employees an opportunity to manage something - to give them an opportunity to fail, if failure is necessary to convince them that they are in charge. A voluntary program for both management and employees, such as a language development program, might fit the bill.

Conclusions

As was noted earlier this exploratory research seeks to raise, not to resolve, issues pertaining to the use of a foreign employer's language. It is based on open-ended interviews within the distinct culture of the greater Vermont area and makes no statistical and methodological claims to generalizability.

American managers by and large don't use their foreign employers' language. They consider use of the language useful and desirable but neither necessary nor feasible. With a couple of possible exceptions, people enjoyed working for foreigners a great deal. It added to the interest of work - in spite of cultural and linguistic difficulties.

Cultural differences are noticed in all the companies, use of the FEL prominent among them, of course.

Vermonters are not globally oriented. Most have never considered the possibility of promotion abroad and would not consider it seriously because of the loss of quality of life.

Some companies instigate language classes, but attempts to learn the language fail if they take up blocks of work time. **Language classes don't work.** To be effective, language learning will have to be integrated into the change of organizational culture which seems to preoccupy American management in the 90's.

Thoughts on integrating language learning.

Finally, from the interviews emerge some characteristics of a new type of language learning, more adapted to the business environment:

1. Consider language learning as an organizational, job-related activity. Its goal is the **use** of the foreign employer's language within the organizational context. It fits in with a larger, managerial strategy of cultural change.

2. Language learning, instead of taking up large blocks of work time, must occur simultaneously with other office activity.

3. This activity can be managed by employees working in groups and can be used as a low-risk opportunity to learn about self-managed work groups and organizational culture as well as learning about language and national culture.

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4. Edgar H. Schein. **Organizational Culture and Leadership**. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass. 1987.

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